

Chapter Five: Opportunities for Action

Opportunities for action

The prevention and management of overweight and obesity, and associated health risks are critically important national and local goals. The US Surgeon General, in the 2001 Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity,¹ presented five overarching principles to help achieve these goals:

- Promote the recognition of overweight and obesity as major public health problems.
- Assist Americans in balancing healthful eating with regular physical activity to achieve and maintain a healthy or healthier body weight.
- Identify effective culturally appropriate interventions to prevent and treat overweight and obesity.
- Encourage environmental changes that help prevent overweight and obesity.
- Develop and enhance public-private partnerships to help implement this vision.

While, for the most part, overweight and obesity are a result of individual behaviors and choices, the environments in which we live shape those behaviors and choices. More than ever, we are challenged throughout the day to make healthy food and physical activity choices in environments that are not supportive. And, we now know the critical link between those choices and our collective future health and well-being.

Our *families, communities, schools, worksites, health care delivery systems, and the mass media*, to a large extent, define our environments. Therefore, these are the settings where we must identify opportunities for change, remove barriers to good health, and promote choices that support good nutrition and regular physical activity. The settings are inter-related and overlapping. Collaboration among and between people and organizations will multiply the efforts to improve weight management by individuals and for the entire population. It is also critical that monitoring and reporting of indicators related to overweight and obesity be continued and refined. Through these efforts, we will be able to focus resources and define successes.

Families and Communities

Families and communities are integral to solving the problems of overweight and obesity. Families provide the perfect setting to teach and model healthy eating and regular physical activity. Adults in families offer day-to-day support and reinforcement of healthy choices for children and each other. In the community, establishing environmental supports and policies, such as walkable safe neighborhoods and easily accessed nutritious foods, helps provide opportunities for families to develop healthy eating and physical activity behaviors.

Schools

Schools provide a primary opportunity to reach Utah's children and youth, during traditional school time and in pre-school and after-school programs. As well as teaching children about healthy eating and physical activity using sound curricula, schools serve as a modeling environment where healthy eating and regular physical activity habits that will last a lifetime can be developed and supported. Schools also have the unique ability to bring together parents, children, and the community to improve children's lives.

Worksites

Much like schools are an effective setting to reach children, worksites are important in reaching adults. Ideally, employers can offer coordinated health communication, education, training, and peer support systems that support healthy eating and regular physical activity. Even in less-than-ideal situations, worksites still afford an opportunity to communicate and model healthy behaviors for working adults. They provide opportunities for healthy physical and social environments, serve as important links to the family and extended communities, and offer a setting in which policy change may be implemented.

Health Care

Because the majority of Utahns interact with the health care system in any given year, health care providers are critical in the fight against overweight and obesity. Most people look to their providers for guidance on health matters, and health insurers may offer important incentives and rewards to encourage and support healthy behaviors. Local health care facilities can provide support and resources for healthy lifestyles. Importantly, providers can bring their

expertise to both prevention and management of overweight and obesity in partnership with their patients, communities, schools, worksites, and the media.

Mass Media and Communications

We are surrounded by a commercial environment and by media messages that influence the choices we make. Unfortunately, increasing numbers of these messages support behaviors and choices that can lead to unhealthy weight gain. The food, beverage, restaurant, entertainment, leisure, and recreation industries share a part of the responsibility for our Nation's obesity epidemic. Media messages supporting choices focusing on healthy weight rather than appearance need to be consistent, clear, coordinated, and targeted. The media can deliver significant services in the fight to prevent and reduce overweight and obesity by increasing health messages, modeling healthy behaviors, and publicizing family, community, school, worksite, and health care provider efforts.

Overall

We are facing an unprecedented public health epidemic of overweight and obesity that may lead to the first generations in our Nation's history who will live shorter lives than their parents, with many of those years being in poor health. The projected long term health care costs of this epidemic are staggering. Utahns of all ages and races and both genders are affected directly or indirectly.

Now is the time for Utah's leaders, in all sectors, to work together to develop a focused, consistent, and coordinated approach that will create a culture and environment in Utah that makes the healthy choice the easy choice.